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“THE SCRAP OF PAPER.”

German Chancellor's Explanation and Great Britain's Reply.

(1.)

January 25, 1915.

THE Associated Press publishes the following account of an interview which its correspondent has had with Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg, the German Imperial Chancellor :—

“German Field Headquarters of the German Armies.

“I am surprised to learn that my phrase, ‘a scrap of paper,’ which I used in my last conversation with the British Ambassador in reference to the Belgian neutrality treaty should have caused such an unfavourable impression in the United States. The expression was used in quite another connection and meaning from that implied in Sir Edward Goschen’s report, and the turn given to it in the biassed comment of our enemies is undoubtedly responsible for this impression.”

The speaker was Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, and the conversation occurred at the Headquarters in a town of Northern France, in a villa serving as office and dwelling for the Chancellor, Minister von Jagow, and the members of the diplomatic suite accompanying the Emperor in the field. The Chancellor had apparently not realised until his attention was called to it the extent to which the phrase had been used in the discussion on the responsibility for the war. He volunteered the explanation of his meaning, which, in substance, was that he had spoken of the treaty, not as a scrap of paper for Germany, but as an instrument which had become so through Belgium’s forfeiture of its neutrality, and that England had quite other reasons for entering the war, compared with which the neutrality treaty, to which she appealed, had only the value of a scrap of paper.

THE BRITISH AMBASSADOR.

“My conversation with Sir E. Goschen,” said the Chancellor, “occurred on the 4th August. I had just declared in the Reichstag that only dire necessity, only the struggle for existence, compelled Germany to march through Belgium, but that Germany was ready to make compensation for the wrong committed. When I spoke I already had certain indications, but no absolute proof, on which to base a public accusation that Belgium had long before abandoned its neutrality in its relations with England. Nevertheless, I took Germany’s responsibilities towards neutral States so seriously that I spoke frankly on the wrong committed by Germany. What was the British attitude on the same question?” said the Chancellor. “The day before my conversation with the British Ambassador, Sir Edward Grey had delivered his well-known speech in Parliament, wherein, while he did not state expressly that England would take part in the war, he left the matter in little doubt. One needs only to read this speech through carefully to learn the reason of England’s intervention in the war. Amid all his beautiful phrases about England’s honour and England’s obligations we find it over and over again expressed that England’s interests—its own interests—called for participation in war, for it was not in England’s interests that a victorious, and therefore stronger, Germany should emerge from the war. This old principle of England’s policy—to take as the sole criterion of its actions its private interests regardless of right, reason, or considerations of humanity—is expressed in that speech of Gladstone’s in 1870 on Belgian neutrality from which Sir Edward quoted. Mr. Gladstone then declared that he was unable to subscribe to the doctrine that the simple fact of the existence of a guarantee is binding upon every party thereto, irrespective altogether of the particular position in which it may find itself at the time when the occasion for action on the guarantee arrives, and he referred to such English statesmen as Aberdeen and Palmerston as supporters of his views.”

“England drew the sword,” continued the Chancellor, “only because she believed her own interests demanded it. Just for Belgian neutrality she would never have

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entered the war. That is what I meant when I told Sir E. Goschen, in that last interview when we sat down to talk the matter over privately man to man, that among the reasons which had impelled England into war the Belgian neutrality treaty had for her only the value of a scrap of paper. I may have been a bit excited and aroused," said the Chancellor. "Who would not have been at seeing the hopes and work of the whole period of my Chancellorship going for naught? I recalled to the Ambassador my efforts for years to bring about an understanding between England and Germany, an understanding which, I reminded him, would have made a general European war impossible, and have absolutely guaranteed the peace of Europe. Such understanding," the Chancellor interjected parenthetically, "would have formed the basis on which we could have approached the United States as a third partner. But England had not taken up this plan, and through its entry into the war had destroyed for ever the hope of its fulfilment. In comparison with such momentous consequences, was the treaty not a scrap of paper?"

THE BELGIAN PAPERS.

"England ought really to cease harping on this theme of Belgian neutrality," said the Chancellor. "Documents on the Anglo-Belgian military agreement, which we have found in the meantime, show plainly enough how England regarded this neutrality. As you know, we found in the archives of the Belgian Foreign Office papers which showed that England in 1911 was determined to throw troops into Belgium without the assent of the Belgian Government if war had then broken out. In other words, do exactly the same thing for which, with all the pathos of virtuous indignation, she now reproached Germany. In some later despatch Grey, I believe, informed Belgium that he did not believe England would take such a step, because he did not think English public opinion would justify such action, and still people in the United States wonder that I characterised as a scrap of paper a treaty whose observance, according to responsible British statesmen, should be dependent upon the pleasure of British public opinion, a treaty which England herself had long since undermined by military agreements with Belgium. Remember, too, that Sir E. Grey expressly refused to assure us of England's neutrality even in the eventuality that Germany respected Belgian neutrality. I can understand therefore English displeasure at my characterisation of the treaty of 1839 as a scrap of paper, for this scrap of paper was for England extremely valuable, as furnishing an excuse before the world for embarking in the war. I hope, therefore, that in the United States you will think clearly enough and realise that England in this matter, too, acted solely on the principle, 'Right or wrong, my interests.'"

THE UNITED STATES NOTE.

The more immediate object of the interview had been to obtain the views of the Chancellor and Herr von Jagow on the Anglo-American negotiations regarding the neutral shipping, and after an examination of the British note the Chancellor made the following statement:—

"I shall not comment on the note of the 7th January which, so far as the facts and questions of trade are concerned, Sir Edward Grey, however, considered it appropriate to add two statements intended to carry weight far beyond the scope of this particular interchange of notes. I mean the paragraph where he speaks of leaving open the question of permitting the shipment of food supplies not intended for the enemy's armies or Government, and his slurs upon us for abandoning the rules of civilisation and humanity.

"It should not be forgotten that England in this war set out to starve over 65,000,000 of people directly by cutting off their food, and indirectly by closing the arteries of their commerce. In attempting this she did not refrain from destroying a considerable part of the trade of neutral nations. It is now beginning to dawn upon Great Britain that she cannot force us into submission by these methods. Sir Edward Grey inserted the sentences in question in the document to stand as a record of English magnanimity which actually never existed, and so tries to mould out of this note a precedent upon which he may some day fall back when the British may have ceased to hold the whiphand control of maritime avenues of supply.

EXORBITANT BRITISH DEMANDS.

"It will be well, then, to remember with what brutal means England tried to throttle us. The nation boasting the most powerful fleet and the strictest adherence to international agreements demands a greater control of neutral shipping than it would be allowed to command if it had declared an effective blockade, which, according to The Hague rulings, it should do, but which it cannot do, being powerless to uphold such a blockade. This is rather remarkable for a nation which vents its moral indignation upon us so frequently for the purpose of creating anti-German sentiment abroad, and so consolidating public sentiment at home; but it is even more extraordinary how this time Sir Edward Grey overdraws his morality account by calling attention to what evil things we might do in the future.

"I rather admire this facility which frequently enables the British Foreign Office to turn defeat ashore or on sea into a victory in the domain of public opinion. When our vessels successfully bombarded the towns on the east coast of England, towns equipped with defences, arsenals, batteries, and other military establishments, despite everything emanating to the contrary from London, no powerful fleet appeared to defend the coast, but all England was made to arise in indignation about our lack of civilisation. Recruiting lists bulged with new names, and reports were spread broadcast which shocked the world with horror at our alleged infamy."

EXPLOSIVE BULLETS.

"These reports defaming us gained in intensity when our dirigibles threw bombs over the fortified town of Great Yarmouth, and warded off attacks from below as they passed over British soil. Now is not this rather audacious diplomatic journalism, in view of the fact that British vessels bombarded the open cities of Dar-es-Salaam, Victoria, Swakopmund, and have often bombarded towns on the Belgian coast without previous announcement, destroying thereby private dwellings belonging to the subjects of the Allies without regard as to who might be living there, and that Great Britain supplies her troops with rifles and ammunition which only outwardly correspond with the rules of The Hague? Bullets with the core constructed in two parts in such a manner that in loading the soldier can easily wrench off the points by inserting them in the sharp-edged hole drilled in the lever attached to the rifle, thus becoming dum-dum ammunition, were produced in large quantities and were found. We have now in our possession many such rifles. We have them still loaded with dum-dum ammunition.

"Nor does Britain show so very delicate a sentiment as to the actions of its Allies. Great Britain claims to fight for the liberty of peoples, but she does not interfere with Russia, who even now is adopting in her own provinces of Poland, Finland, and the Baltic Provinces, and against the Jews a police terrorism barely equalled in history. England's other ally, France, time and again sent aviators to bombard towns which had no fortifications whatever, and no importance from a military point of view, prominent among these being Luxemburg and Freiburg in the Black Forest. Now, thousands of German women and children and a few old men have returned from France. Many are still there who for months and months have suffered in French concentration camps treatment so inhuman that it almost beggars description. No hostile civilian man or woman was ever put into a concentration camp in Germany until the beginning of November, when it was found necessary to retaliate against the British, and later the French, as these nations continued to refuse to let German civilians go free. No British, French, or Russian woman living in the Empire was ever put in a concentration camp in Germany.

"With such a score counting against England and the Allies, let nobody in the future ever be deceived by magnanimous appeals to civilisation and humanity, although they be so ingeniously inserted in diplomatic notes dealing with the throttling of neutral traffic."

(2.)

January 26, 1915.

THE Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs authorises the publication of the following observations upon the report of an interview recently granted by the German Chancellor to an American correspondent :—

It is not surprising that the German Chancellor should show anxiety to explain away his now historic phrase about a treaty being a mere "scrap of paper." The phrase has made a deep impression because the progress of the world largely depends upon the sanctity of agreements between individuals and between nations, and the policy disclosed in Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg's phrase tends to debase the legal and moral currency of civilisation.

What the German Chancellor said was that Great Britain, in requiring Germany to respect the neutrality of Belgium, "was going to make war just for a word, just for a scrap of paper"; that is, that Great Britain was making a mountain out of a molehill. He now asks the American public to believe that he meant the exact opposite of what he said; that it was Great Britain who really regarded the neutrality of Belgium as a mere trifle, and Germany who "took her responsibilities towards neutral States seriously." The arguments by which Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg seeks to establish the two sides of this case are in flat contradiction of plain facts.

First, the German Chancellor alleges that "England in 1911 was determined to throw troops into Belgium without the assent of the Belgian Government." This allegation is absolutely false. It is based upon certain documents found in Brussels which record conversations between British and Belgian officers in 1906 and again in 1911. The fact that there is no note of these conversations at the British War Office or Foreign Office shows that they were of a purely informal character, and no military agreement of any sort was at either time made between the two Governments. Before any conversations took place between British and Belgian officers, it was expressly laid down on the British side that the discussion of military possibilities was to be addressed to the manner in which, in case of need, British assistance could be most effectually afforded to Belgium *for the defence of her neutrality*, and on the Belgian side a marginal note upon the record explains that "the entry of the English into Belgium would only take place *after the violation of our neutrality by Germany*." As regards the conversation of 1911, the Belgian officer said to the British, "You could only land in our country with our consent," and in 1913 Sir Edward Grey gave the Belgian Government a categorical assurance that no British Government would violate the neutrality of Belgium, and that "so long as it was not violated by any other Power we should certainly not send troops ourselves into their territory."

The Chancellor's method of misusing documents may be illustrated in this connection. He represents Sir Edward Grey as saying, "He did not believe England would take such a step, because he did not think English public opinion would justify such action." What Sir Edward Grey actually wrote was: "I said that I was sure that this Government would not be the first to violate the neutrality of Belgium, and I did not believe that any British Government would be the first to do so, nor would public opinion here ever approve of it."

If the German Chancellor wishes to know why there were conversations on military subjects between British and Belgian officers, he may find one reason in a fact well known to him, namely, that Germany was establishing an elaborate network of strategical railways, leading from the Rhine to the Belgian frontier, through a barren, thinly-populated tract: railways deliberately constructed to permit of a sudden attack upon Belgium, such as was carried out in August last. This fact alone was enough to justify any communications between Belgium and other Powers on the footing that there would be no violation of Belgian neutrality unless it were previously violated by another Power. On no other footing did Belgium ever have any such communications. In spite of these facts the German Chancellor speaks of Belgium having thereby "abandoned" and "forfeited" her neutrality, and he implies that he would not have spoken of the German invasion as a "wrong" had he then known of the conversations of 1906 and 1911. It would seem to follow, that according to Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg's code, a wrong becomes a right if the party which is to be the subject of the wrong foresees the possibility and makes preparations to resist it. Those who are content with older and more generally accepted standards are likely to agree rather with what Cardinal Mercier said in his Pastoral letter: "Belgium was bound in honour to defend her own independence. She kept her oath. The other Powers were bound

to respect and protect her neutrality. Germany violated her oath ; England kept hers. These are the facts."

In support of the second part of the German Chancellor's thesis, namely, that Germany "took her responsibilities towards neutral States seriously," he alleges nothing except that "he spoke frankly of the wrong committed by Germany" in invading Belgium. That a man knows the right, while doing the wrong, is not usually accepted as proof of his serious conscientiousness.

The real nature of Germany's view of her "responsibilities towards neutral States" may, however, be learnt, on authority which cannot be disputed, by reference to the English White Paper. If those responsibilities were in truth taken seriously, why, when Germany was asked to respect the neutrality of Belgium if it were respected by France, did Germany refuse? France, when asked the corresponding question at the same time, agreed. This would have guaranteed Germany from all danger of attack through Belgium. The reason of Germany's refusal was given by Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg's colleague. It may be paraphrased in the well-known gloss upon Shakespeare :

"Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just ;
But four times he that gets his blow in fust."

"They had to advance into France," said Herr von Jagow, "by the quickest and easiest way, so as to be able to get well ahead with their operations and endeavour to strike some decisive blow as early as possible."

Germany's real attitude towards Belgium was thus frankly given by the German Foreign Secretary to the British Ambassador, and the German Chancellor, in his speech to the Reichstag, claimed the right to commit a wrong in virtue of the military necessity of "hacking a way through." The treaty which forbade the wrong was by comparison a mere scrap of paper. The truth was spoken in the first statements by the two German Ministers. All the apologies and arguments which have since been forthcoming are afterthoughts to excuse and explain away a flagrant wrong. Moreover, all attacks upon Great Britain in regard to this matter, and all talk about "responsibilities towards neutral States," come badly from the man who on the 29th July asked Great Britain to enter into a bargain to condone the violation of the neutrality of Belgium.

The German Chancellor spoke to the American correspondent of his "efforts for years to bring about an understanding between England and Germany," an understanding, he added, which would have "absolutely guaranteed the peace of Europe." He omitted to mention what Mr. Asquith made public in his speech at Cardiff, that Germany required, as the price of an understanding, an unconditional pledge of England's neutrality. The British Government were ready to bind themselves not to be parties to any aggression against Germany ; they were not prepared to pledge their neutrality in case of aggression by Germany. An Anglo-German understanding on the latter terms would not have meant an absolute guarantee for the peace of Europe ; but it would have meant an absolutely free hand for Germany, so far as England was concerned, for Germany to break the peace of Europe.

The Chancellor says that in his conversation with the British Ambassador in August last he "may have been a bit excited at seeing the hopes and work of the whole period of his Chancellorship going for nought." Considering that at the date of the conversation (4th August) Germany had already made war on France the natural conclusion is that the shipwreck of the Chancellor's hopes consisted, not in the fact of a European war, but in the fact that England had not agreed to stand out of it.

The sincerity of the German Chancellor's professions to the American correspondent may be brought to a very simple test, the application of which is the more apposite because it serves to recall one of the leading facts which produced the present war. Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg refused the proposal, which England put forward and in which France, Italy, and Russia concurred, for a Conference at which the dispute would have been settled on fair and honourable terms without war. If he really wished to work with England for peace, why did he not accept that proposal? He must have known, after the Balkan Conference in London that England could be trusted to play fair. Herr von Jagow had given testimony in the Reichstag to England's good faith in those negotiations. The proposal for a second Conference between the Powers was made by Sir Edward Grey with the same straightforward desire for peace as in 1912 and 1913. The German Chancellor rejected this means of averting war. He who does

not will the means must not complain if the conclusion is drawn that he did not will the end.

The second part of the interview with the American correspondent consists of a discourse upon the ethics of war. The things which Germany has done in Belgium and France have been placed on record before the world by those who have suffered from them and who know them at first hand. After this, it does not lie with the German Chancellor to read to other belligerents a lecture upon the conduct of war.